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Japanese War Brides: Bridges in the Post-War Alliance

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Abstract

On Thursday, December 3, 2020, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) welcomed Ms. Kathryn Tolbert, an editor at the Washington Post, and Col. (Ret.) Jyuji Hewitt to discuss the role of Japanese women who married American G.I.s following World War II (WWII) as bridges in Japan's transition from wartime enemy to post-war ally. With Ms. Tolbert's academic perspective on the topic from her oral history project, Japanese War Brides, alongside Col. Hewitt's family connection preserved in the project, these two speakers brought informed and diverse insights to the webinar.

This talk was presented through Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington D.C. policy community, academic think tanks, the private sector, and former and current members of the military and government. Ms. Shanti Shoji, Director of Programs at Sasakawa USA introduced Ms. Tolbert and Col. Hewitt, moderated the webinar, and facilitated the Q&A.

Remarks by Ms. Kathryn Tolbert

Ms. Tolbert began her remarks by stating that her project, Japanese War Brides: An Oral History Archive, demonstrates the important role of Japanese immigrant war brides in the U.S.-Japan alliance following the end of WWII. Ms. Tolbert believes that the best way to tell the impact of policy is through personal stories, so she aimed to gather and document the war brides' stories through this multimedia project. Through examining the war bride's personal stories, Ms. Tolbert identified three key themes in the war brides' relationship with U.S. foreign and domestic policy during the years following the end of WWII. First, the role of the military and immigration policy in the relationship between servicemen and Japanese women changed over the course of time. Secondly, the dawn of the Cold War and shifting U.S. foreign policy changed attitudes towards Japanese war brides, leading to the integration of Japanese women into U.S. communities. Lastly, Japanese war brides changed public opinion of Japan in the United States following years of anti-Japanese wartime propaganda. These three themes, as identified by Ms. Tolbert, formed the basis of her following discussion, where she dove into the history of Japanese war brides.

First, Ms. Tolbert highlighted the many barriers preventing the immigration of Japanese war brides to the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 excluded immigrants from Asia, barring entry for Japanese women who married American G.I.'s. Furthermore, the U.S. military attempted to dissuade soldiers from fraternizing with Japanese women. Though the military did not strictly ban fraternization, they tried to make marriage difficult through imposing bureaucratic obstacles and the frequent transfer of troops to new deployments. This difficulty was coupled with growing tensions in the United States to address war brides from all over the globe from WWII, which led to the 1945 War Brides Act. Unfortunately, the wording in the original act did not enable Japanese women to immigrate to the United States, except for some states that allowed immigration such as Washington, leaving them limited avenues for immigration. Then in 1947, an amendment was made to the act, making any war bride, regardless of race, able to immigrate to the United States. Furthermore, the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (The McCarran-Walter Act) removed all barriers for Asian immigrants and made it possible for Japanese people to enter the U.S. for the first time since 1924. Ms. Tolbert concluded the historical retelling of Japanese war brides by stating that with the immigration of Japanese war brides to the United States, by 1959, they had increased the overall population of Asian Americans by 12%.

Following Ms. Tolbert's historical account of Japanese war brides, she shared an interesting short clip of an interview between a Japanese war bride and her husband, Col. Hewitt's parents. If interested in the video, the clip starts at 14:52 and ends at 18:37.

After the short video, Ms. Tolbert began to conclude her remarks by addressing the impact of Japanese war brides on the U.S.-Japan alliance, both within Japan and the United States. With the rise of the Soviet Union and the Korean War, Japan shifted from a wartime enemy to a U.S. ally in the growing Cold War. This shift also carried over to the attitude surrounding war brides. First, some Japanese war brides were able to enroll in brides schools sponsored by U.S. organizations in Japan. In these schools, Japanese women were taught how to be American housewives, a shift, as identified by Ms. Tolbert, to the post-war focus on the alliance and a return to domestic concerns. These classes also emphasized the importance of the war brides in the post-war U.S.-Japan relationship. Ms. Tolbert stated that these women were ambassadors of Japan and that they were taught to be proud of their role and culture. Secondly, Japanese war brides immigrated throughout the United States. Though many struggled with sudden relocations to rural areas, and Japanese wives of African American servicemen faced additional racial discrimination issues, Ms. Tolbert contended that the war brides strongly impacted their new homes. For many U.S. communities, these women presented a friendlier image of Japan, acting as grassroots ambassadors and helping change U.S. public opinion on Japan. They did so in three ways: taking on jobs, sharing Japanese culture, and volunteering in communities. Concluding her remarks, Ms. Tolbert stated that it is through these means that Japanese war brides came to represent racial integration and cultural pluralism, playing a defining role in bridging the U.S.-Japan post-war alliance.

Remarks by Col. Jyuji Hewitt

Next, Col. Hewitt, son of a Japanese war bride and an American G.I., spoke on his personal upbringing in the United States and how his family background shaped him as a grew up. Col. Hewitt began by explaining that his upbringing was one of an "army brat," a term he affectionately used to describe his childhood as a member of a military family that moved frequently throughout U.S. military bases. Due to his father's occupation, Col. Hewitt was often surrounded by other military families, and seeing interracial families was normal. In this community, Col. Hewitt's Japanese mother worked hard to integrate the family through ensuring her children learned English, supporting the school system through volunteer activities, and sharing Japanese culture via cooking and show-and-tell at school. Col. Hewitt's mother began this process again when the family moved to

Pennsylvania, outside of the comfort of the military base and familiar interracial family culture. Here, Col. Hewitt shared that he had his share of prejudice against him, sharing a story that his first day at school was always a tough one because of his name, Jyuji, which his teachers had difficulty pronouncing. Despite his early hardships, Col. Hewitt stated that his Japanese name has given him a sense of identity over time. Similarly, Col. Hewitt's family also had troubles, but his mother Akiko overcame them by once again integrating herself into their community, eventually opening her own business, a flower shop. Col. Hewitt concluded his remarks by stating that his mother's legacy to her family has been to work hard, not shy away from one's identity, and through that, one can be successful.

In response to Col. Hewitt's personal story, Ms. Tolbert added that the legacy of Japanese war brides is one of action. They were not merely passive observers of opportunity. These women held agency over their future, as shown in Col. Hewitt's family story, and they served as representatives of Japan throughout the United States. Ms. Tolbert stated that through their interactions with Americans, the Japanese war brides brought the *ganbaru* (do your best) spirit from Japan and positively changed the way Americans embraced Japanese people. Concluding, Ms. Tolbert stated that Japanese war brides embody Japanese grassroots diplomacy that was homegrown in America.

Moderated Q&A with Attendees

The first question of the Q&A came from Dr. Marlene Mayo, Associate Professor Emerita at the University of Maryland. Dr. Mayo asked the speakers if, during the post-WWII era, Japanese war brides played a role in the growth, interest, and study of the Japanese language in U.S. academia. Ms. Tolbert responded first by stating that, during the 1950s, Japanese war brides were holding small cultural events throughout the United States and it was through these events that they taught Japanese to the people in their local communities. She added that the generation of scholars in the post-WWII era focused on Japan and Japanese often came from places in the United States that had connections to Japan, such as Minnesota, demonstrating that how Japan was portrayed in America contributed to the understanding of the Japanese language and culture. Next, Col. Hewitt stated that it was in small-town America where the education of young people on Japanese topics was important. Such learning took place at a grassroots level instead of a top-down education policy through Japanese war brides.

The next set of questions came from Ms. Fath Davis Ruffins, Curator at the National Museum of American History, and Ms. Mikala Woodward, Exhibit

Director at the Wing Luke Museum. These two questions were directed to Col. Hewitt to discuss his mother and sister's experiences in the United States. First, Col. Hewitt discussed that his mother had received a master's degree in Horticulture prior to immigrating to the United States, enabling her to open her own business in the United States. For his sisters, he stated that in their early years, they did not face any troubles assimilating into America as Asian Americans; however, as the Vietnam War began, they did face some anti-Asian discrimination as American attitudes reflected how U.S. media were portraying wartime enemies.

The Q&A then turned to address a question from Lt Col. (Ret.) Raymond Swenson, who asked whether the integration of Japanese war brides into military families, where loyalty to the U.S. is strongly valued, played a role in ending American prejudice that had engendered the Immigration Act of 1924. In response, Ms. Tolbert stated that the ban in 1924 was part of a longer period of increasing anti-Asian hysteria occurring in the United States. For Japan, they attempted to avoid the same kind of ban placed on Chinese people in The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 but were ultimately unsuccessful. Therefore, Ms. Tolbert stated that in the post-WWII era, Japanese war brides and military families played an important role in abating anti-Asian hysteria. Additionally, by 1952, when the ban on all Asian immigration was lifted, Ms. Tolbert stated that the ban was almost an afterthought as many Japanese war brides were already assimilated into American life.

Next, Mr. Katsuyuki Imamura, President of the Washington Innovation Network, asked Ms. Tolbert if there were any differences in experiences between Japanese war brides who arrived before and after 1960, as Ms. Tolbert had referred to 1959 as a cut-off point in her research. In response, Ms. Tolbert stated that more Japanese war brides continued to immigrate to the United States throughout the 1960s and had very similar experiences to Japanese women who had come to America before them. Ms. Tolbert did note that as time passed, Japanese women who immigrated to the U.S. later than the 1960s had different experiences than earlier generations as they came for more diverse reasons, not solely as war brides, due to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Ms. Shoji asked the following question concerning how generations removed, such as grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Japanese war brides, are carrying on their legacies. Col. Hewitt responded first by stating that, for him, a great sense of pride runs throughout the entire extended family in their family background. Next, Ms. Tolbert discussed that in her research, in every family there is always at least one family member actively pursuing the understanding of the war bride's story. These family members do this because Japanese war bride stories are not widely known or shared. Therefore, it was unusual for these

families to meet families with backgrounds similar to their own. Overall, Ms. Tolbert stated that there is a broadening of the Japanese-American community and experience, and it has become much more inclusive over time.

The last question came from Ms. Emily Lu, a graduate student at Florida State University, who asked the speakers to discuss how the Japanese people perceived Japanese war brides. First, Col. Hewitt responded on a broader scale by describing his experience as a Japanese American. In his visits to Japan, he recalled, he has been generally perceived as an American, not as Japanese. He added that the blend of two cultures continues today. Next, Ms. Tolbert stated that, in the immediate post-war years, the war brides issue was fraught within Japanese culture. The Japanese media portrayed war brides as women who were low class and the term took on a very negative connotation within both the U.S. and Japan. However, Ms. Tolbert stated that as time went on, many cases of reconciliation and exploration of familial ties occurred, indicating that the Japanese view has changed over time.

Col. Hewitt and Ms. Tolbert concluded the event by expressing their gratitude to their relevant parties. For Col. Hewitt, he shared that events like this one are great opportunities to share his family's legacy, adding that he was thankful for his parents. Ms. Tolbert stated that she will continue to work on this project alongside her peers and thanked them for their continued support on the Japanese War Brides: An Oral History Archive.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Ms. Tolbert, Col. Hewitt, Q&A participants, and attendees for the thoughtful discussion on the role of Japanese War Brides in bridging the U.S.-Japan alliance.

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